

Foster Care Disruptions
Practice Evaluation Project
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Abstract

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Reasons for foster care disruption have been a source of research for child welfare workers for years. The following is a study that examines the variable of prior number of reports of maltreatment before entering foster care as having a correlation to foster care disruption. The study utilized a placement move listing report of a regional social service office in Western Kentucky to identify children in care and the number of moves while in care. Case records are utilized to identify the number of maltreatment reports had been received prior to removal. While a high correlation was not found between prior number of maltreatment reports prior to entering foster care having any correlation to number of foster care disruptions, the study did identify other avenues of research on the topic.

Practice Evaluation Project

Introduction

Reasons for foster care disruptions have the source of research of child welfare studies for many years. With the Adoptions Safe and Families of 1997, state welfare agencies stand to lose federal funds when a child has more than two moves during their foster care placement. Due to this, examining possible reasons for foster care disruptions is becoming increasingly important for child protective services agencies. More importantly than funding, foster care placement is ideally supposed to create stability within a child's life that the child cannot obtain in their natural environment. Movements within foster care often create instability within a child's life, which defeats the purpose of the system. In recent years relative placement, also known as kinship care, has been an alternative to foster care in hopes relative environment would create a familiar and stable environment for children.

Past literature has identified several reasons for foster care disruption. One study (McWey, 2004) identified differences in attachment quality of children as being a major predictor of foster care disruption over any other variable including type of maltreatment the child suffered prior to entering care. McWey (2004) study involved observation and evaluation of the biological parents and child(ren) during supervised visitations. McWey identified the type of attachment style with the parent and found that parents who bonded with parents during visitations had lower number of foster care disruptions.

In another study (James, 2004) refuted the notion that behavioral problems and attachment styles are the source of most foster care moves. James examined factors beyond behavioral problems to include, policy/system related moves, problems with foster families and problems with biological parents. James (2004) identified policy or system related issues

as being the cause of 70 % of all moves children in the California foster system in 1990. A study of kinship care (Rittner, 1995) cited no real benefits to kinship care as most relatives were not trained and prepared to deal with behavior problems experienced by maltreated children.

Past studies on foster care disruptions have produced conflicting information. This study looks to examine another possible variable to foster care disruptions by examining the number of past referrals of maltreatment a child is reported to experience prior to entering foster care to see if this variable has an effect on the number of placement moves of a child in care. Information obtained came from case records of children in placement in a rural region in Western Kentucky. Information was obtained to establish if there is a correlation between number of reports of maltreatment a child has prior to entering care and the number of moves a child has while in care.

Method

This study was quantitative in nature as figures received from monthly reports identifying placement moves of children in care were utilized. No human subjects were interviewed during this study. The purpose of the study was to gather existing statistical data. Data gathered for this research project was obtained from the TWS-W058 Children in Placement List for the Pennyriple Region of Western Kentucky for the Month of February 2005. Ten cases were randomly selected from the placement list. Case files of the 10 cases were then examined to identify the number of referrals made to the agency prior to the child entering care.

Type of maltreatment, race of child, age of child and sex of child were additional variables collected through the case file. Variables gathered were entered into a statistical

program (the Statistical Program for Social Services, SPSS) to identify correlations, frequencies and descriptives of each variable. The independent variable in the study was number of moves during placement with dependent variables being number of prior referrals, sex and age of child and type of maltreatment experienced. Case files were examined to identify the type of maltreatment, sex of child, age of child and race of child. The type of maltreatment, the sex of child and the age of child were each nominal levels of data used to compare demographics of the children within the sample. The two scale levels of data, number of prior reports of maltreatment and number of moves in care, were the two levels measurement correlated. Measurement correlated using the Pearsons Correlation at the level .05 was established as the standard rejection level.

Results

Regarding moves while in care, 30 % of children in care had experienced one move while in care, 30 % of children had experienced 2 moves while in care, 10% of children had experienced 4 moves in care, 10% of children had 5 moves in care, 10% of children had experienced 10 moves in care and 10% of children had 24 moves in care. The gender of the children consisted of 40 % of children in care being male with 60 % of children in care being female. The race of the children in this population consisted of 90 % of the children being identified as white and 10 % of the children being identified as black/African American (see Appendix A, page 11).

50 % of the population was identified as being under the age of 11 and 50 % of the population was identified as being 11 and older. In terms of maltreatment leading to the removal, 70 % of the reports that led to removal of the child consisted of neglect reports. 20 % consisted of physical abuse and 10 % consisted of dual reports of dependency and physical

abuse. The r value for Pearsons Correlation between number of reports prior to entering foster care and number of moves during foster care was $-.412$.

Discussion

Study findings show that there is no real correlation between the number of reports of maltreatment a child has prior to entering care and the number of moves a child has while in care. The r value of this correlation was $-.412$, this represents a negative, low correlation between the two variables and shows no significance between the two variables. The hypothesis of study was that there was a correlation between the number of maltreatment referrals a child has prior to entering care and the number of times the number of movements during care. The study rejects this hypothesis. No prior literature was found on this topic and due to the low correlation, it is questionable if a larger sample would benefit an examination.

The study did identify neglect as being the main form of maltreatment leading to removal of children in this study. In past literature, neglect is often identified as the type of maltreatment leading to the removal of child. Future research could benefit on focusing on psychological and behavior characteristics of children who have experienced neglect as a possible pre-cursor to foster care placement disruption. Of the sample studied, most of the children were female and there was an overwhelming identification of children being of the white race. The fact that the majority of the children that were removed were female is interesting fact and future research could focus on this being a regional characteristic or a nationwide characteristic. There could be a surplus of females born and living in this region and that could be possible explanation to more females being in the sample than male. The predominant race of the children being white fits with the region as individuals of the white race are the majority.

There were several limitations to this study. The major limitation involved the size of the sample examined. Only 10 cases out of 270 were examined for the purpose of this study. More cases or all cases implemented into the study could possibly have given a different correlation between the scale variables. That correlation could have proven the hypothesis to have a higher rejection rate or a closer acceptance. The sample size is a major limitation to consider within this sample.

Other limitations are evident in the variables studied. Past literature that was previously discussed behavioral characteristics and attachment styles of the child as being a factor in predicting foster care placement stability. This study did not allow for the examination of behavioral problems of the children prior to entering care nor did it give explanation to mental health treatment or the lack of mental health treatment of children in care as being factors to foster care moves. As well, reasons for moves were not identified be it behavioral reasons, policy moves, problems with the foster home or movements to relative placement were not identified as possible consideration for moves.

Another limitation to the study was that the study was simply quantitative. A qualitative component consisting of interviews with children, workers and foster parents would have benefited this study. In this respect, first hand accounts of what caused disruptions from the child protective service worker, the foster parent and the child. Biological parents attitudes and perceptions could also be included in the quantitative component of the study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As previously mentioned, this study did present interesting characteristics of the demographics of children in care. Future studies do need to examine the effects of neglect on

children and the reasons neglect reports could lead to higher rates of foster care disruption. In the region examined, reports of neglect were far higher than any other report of maltreatment in the removal of a child. Perhaps more insight in future research could be given to the reason why neglect leads to removal than any other form of maltreatment. Is it because more reports of neglect are made or neglect allegations are easier to prove in the court system; therefore, leading to more removals. While this is somewhat off the topic of this research if this study can be generalized to a larger population, preventative services, family preservation services and in-depth services to caretakers who have neglected children need to be identified and utilized in child welfare agencies.

In the area of the effects of neglect on children, future research needs to focus on child behavioral factors found in children of neglect. Using immediate and intense mental health services, once behavioral factors have been identified could help minimize disruptions of neglected children in care. More importantly, this research could lead to better counseling and treatment for children who have experienced neglect prior to being placed in foster care.

Likewise, future research into foster care disruptions needs to combine both quantitative and qualitative components. Actual statistics of the number of moves are important but a major component that appears to be missing from research on this topic is qualitative interviews. Researchers need to focus on case-by-case reasons of disruptions by speaking with child protective service workers, foster parents and children in care to identify real-life reasons of disruptions. After those reasons for disruption have been identified, a study could incorporate those components to other areas to see if reasons for placement disruption are consistent or based on geographic reasons for disruptions. This could help to identify a universal solution to the problem or it could identify geographic issues affecting

disruption and offer avenues for less specific reasons for disruptions. Regardless of what variables are used to explore this topic, future research is needed as instability in the foster care setting continues to rise despite relative care options.

References

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